

Minenkova P. Conceptual foundations and categorical definition of «think tanks»: academic rethinking of traditional approaches

Analytical and research organizations known in the world as think tanks have become increasingly influential actors on the political scene in recent decades. In a context of constant change and erosion of the borders between internal and external policies, they are able to respond promptly, providing timely, reliable, accessible and useful information for making substantiated political decisions. The definition of «think tanks», however, creates a conceptual gap that causes serious limitations on the development of this field of study. Excessive generality or inflexibility in the use of the concept raises questions about the validity of the category. Either way, the «trade offs» of the conceptual choices have delineated a not very useful concept of «think tanks» to both inter-contextual and inter-organizational comparability and to differentiate think tanks from overlapping organizations. The article revisits some of these dilemmas. To do so, the treatment in the specialized literature of the analytic category, highlighting both the insensitivity of the traditional North American approaches to different national contexts and its obsolescence to the changes in the context of «think tanks» action, including their own context of origin, is explained.

The reasons of «conceptual stretching» and separation of the analytic category «think tanks» from the evolution of the phenomenon as a whole are investigated.

In shedding light on promising conceptual contributions to the study of the phenomenon in its contemporary features, the main contribution of the present article is specifying the contents and the proposal of definition of «think tanks» with the peculiarities of their functioning in different national contexts.

Key words: «think tanks», think tanks «conceptual stretching», «ladder of abstraction», national contexts.